Child labour versus child work

All work and no play

The struggle against child labour is showing results. But the consensus is now being attacked from two sides: abolish all child labour versus there is nothing wrong with child work.

Child labour policies remain high on the development agenda. Most major NGOs in the West have policies on and support projects related to child labour in developing countries. There is increasing focus on the issue in corporate social responsibility discussions prompted by activist groups that have launched campaigns boycotting products manufactured by children. Multinational corporations have become very sensitive to the presence of child labourers in their production chains. Even governments get entangled in consumer boycotts. In June 2008 the EC adopted a proposal initiated by the Dutch government to study the possibility of using trade-related measures against import products manufactured by child labourers.

A steady decline

In many developing countries, children account for one third to one half of the population. They should all be able to attend school and enjoy a proper childhood, as those born to wealthier families are more likely to do. Many studies have shown that child labour is mainly a problem for poor, vulnerable and crisis-stricken families in the most impoverished countries.

There has been progress in the struggle against child labour. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has been particularly active in establishing an international standard to create a worldwide understanding of what child labour is and which forms of it need to be abolished. Within the ILO, the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) and the Statistical Information Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) have produced a vast array of country-wide data and studies. These have provided important indicators of the issues involved and of the progress that has been made.

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Summary

- Overall, there has been a steady decline in child labour.
- Consumer boycotts have had mixed effects.
- The ILO and many NGOs argue that all child labour should be abolished.
- Some scholars and some NGOs talk in terms of 'child work': the *protagonistas*. Governments should introduce measures that secure the right of children to work and then protect the working child.

In its latest global report on child labour, the ILO announced that 'the end of child labour is within reach'. It calculated that the total number of child labourers had fallen by 11%, to 218 million, between 2000 and 2004. This figure includes all working children, even those in the 14–17 age range who are doing harmful work. The incidence of children in the so-called 'worst forms' of labour has witnessed an even sharper decline. It dropped by 26% to 126 million; 74 million children below 14 years are involved in the worst forms of child labour.

Overall there has been an unmistakable decline in child labour. However in some countries it has only been slight and in other countries conditions have worsened. Consumer boycotts may have been one of the factors in this decline, but labourers in export-oriented industries are only a small segment of the total child labour force. The problem remains serious in South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty and malfunctioning education systems force millions of children into labour.

Negative effects

Consumer boycotts in specific cases may have had negative effects. Boycotts destroy the livelihoods of working children without providing alternative sources of income. What happens to child labourers who are sacked from their workplaces in the wake of a consumer boycott or because of restrictions imposed by Western governments? Unfortunately many children end up in worse conditions after losing >

India has the largest child labour force in the world. Efforts are being made to send them to school.

their jobs. This is one of the reasons why mainstream organizations have pleaded for a more balanced and contextual approach that involves all the partners in the field.

However, the boycott campaigns have indirectly helped raise awareness of the child labour issue. Economic development, technological changes, a better educational infrastructure, government policy initiatives and the gradual changing of the standards in civil society have all played a part. Globalization may also be helping, not due to improving economic conditions, but because of the dissemination of a new childhood standard across the globe.

One effect of the ILO Convention 182, adopted in 1999, is that official sanction has been given to the idea that not all work done by children needs to be eradicated. Not all the work children perform is necessarily negative. In reality, children can do a variety of jobs under widely divergent conditions.

Child labour takes place along a continuum. At one end, it is beneficial and promotes or enhances a child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development without interfering with school, recreation or rest. At the other extreme, the work is destructive and exploitative. A more precise delineation of what child labour is can be determined by a combination of Convention 138 (setting the age standards) and Convention 182 (setting the harm standards). This is the general line along which governments have been working.

Disagreements

Not everyone accepts this distinction. Some scholars and NGOs claim that nothing is wrong with child labour. They actually avoid using the term and instead talk in terms of 'child work'. Governments, rather than taking measures against child labour, should introduce measures that secure the right of children to work and then protect the working child.

Over the last decade an international movement has emerged that opposes the eradication of child labour. The International Movement of Working Children consists of several national networks of working children organizations

from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. 'Yes to Child Work, No to Exploitation' is their slogan.

According to Manfred Liebel, one of the ideologues behind this movement, children should be regarded as independent individuals who can judge and design their lives themselves. This idea of participation in the Latin American context is referred to as *protagonismo*. It refers to the capacity to participate in society and to transform it. Liebel argues that the ILO 'is deaf to the concrete interests of working children' and 'should be recommended to ask exactly what could help to improve the situation of these children – while actually listening to working children and their organizations, and beginning a serious dialogue marked by mutual respect'.

The ILO focuses on the worst forms of child labour in combination with Convention 138. Some organizations and alliances consider this a soft and compromising option. They argue that all forms of child labour should be abolished on a priority basis. Organizations and action committees, such as Stop Child Labour Now, regard all forms of work done by children as child labour. They also consider any child who is not in school to be a child labourer.

In the case of India, for example, Stop Child Labour Now has come up with a figure of between 50 million and 100 million child labourers, much higher than the official figure of 11 million. The organization also argues that child labour is far more a cause than an effect of poverty, and that it can be eradicated without ending poverty first. Getting all children into school is their approach, and as such they reject the prioritization of the worst forms. The organization advocates that, instead, the ILO should address the elimination of all forms of child labour. The focus on worst forms is bad policy 'leading to piecemeal *ad hoc* solutions and creating an obstacle to a sustainable comprehensive strategy towards the elimination of all forms of child labour'.

The International Labour Organization

The ILO is a tripartite organization, representing government, trade unions and employers. It relies on national governments to implement its recommendations.

The ILO has agreed on two conventions, which are widely accepted. The so-called Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), adopted in 1973, requires states to design and apply national policies to set a minimum age for admission to employment. In developing countries, children below the age of 12 are not allowed to work. Children below the age of 14 are allowed to be engaged only in light labour, but this is restricted in time and levels of harm.

In 1999, Convention 182, the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, was agreed on after many years of negotiations. This convention explicitly calls for the immediate prohibition and elimination of those forms of child labour which 'by the nature or circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children'. It also calls for effective and time-bound measures to ensure access to free basic education. Around 160 countries have ratified this convention and many NGOs have been encouraged to launch their own projects to ban child labour.

Complicated practice

There has been a lot of progress in the struggle against child labour. Above all, a normative framework has been established that sets an international standard for policy making and monitoring.

This framework is under contention. It is considered too soft by some because it does not address all forms of child labour, and too strict by others. Quite often, however, discussions are conducted within the confines of a paradigmatic understanding. Ideological positions tend to keep reality at length.

For example, a recent study of the child labour organizations in a number of countries concluded that the children usually did not fall under the child labour definition of the ILO. They did only light work if they did any work at all, and by and large were adolescents.

On the other hand, organizations that are against child labour and in favour of universal elementary education, such as Plan International, Terre des Hommes and even the ILO in some cases, have been intervening in such a way that the children can continue working while getting some measure of education and protection. Given the financial constraints, it is as far as one can go.

Policies are in place, financial resources are available and public opinion is sensitive to the issue. Yet the problem continues. Ending child labour and achieving universal primary education is the target, but it remains elusive in an environment of deprivation and unfathomable misery. ■

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